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ABSTRACT

The teaching of spelling is outlined and discussed in this pamphlet. Three major steps are described: the prewriting stage, teaching the principle of alphabetic writing--the understanding that spelling requires the sequencing of sounds within a word, and teaching the spelling patterns of written English. The pamphlet concludes that two current practices are detrimental to children in developing spelling skills: teaching spelling words and demanding perfect spelling. (JM)

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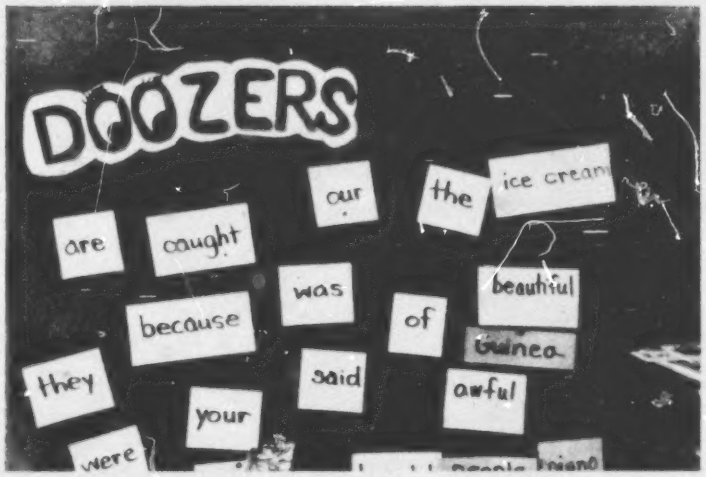

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Spelling

by Marlene and Robert McCracken

An Introduction

by Clara A. Pederson

Do You Know

CS 203 051

Spelling

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TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO SPELL has three major steps.

1. A readiness or pre-writing stage.

2. Teaching the principle of alphabetic writing.

3. Teaching the spelling patterns of written English.

Pre-Writing

Children learn two concepts. They become aware of words and sense what a word is. They become aware of the similarities and differences between spoken English and written English.

The Concept of a Word

Young children do not know what a word is. They confuse phrases, syllables, and words. "How are you?" or "Good morning," if spoken as we normally say them sound like one word or three syllables. There is nothing in the speech that indicates the separation into words. Children need to work orally until they develop an intuitive awareness of words. The children and teacher chant daily rhythmic and repetitive language. They chant poetry, nursery rhymes, rhyming stories, and cumulative stories, and stories with repetitive choruses. The teacher calls attention to words as words and has children respond to the rhythm of language by clapping hands, snapping fingers, etc. This practice is carried out throughout the elementary grades.

The Awareness of Patterns within our Spoken Language

Almost all children respond to the differences in spoken language. They can pick up the cup, pick up the cap, or pick up the cat, if shown several plastic objects and asked to do so. They do this in beginning kindergarten almost without failure. They demonstrate clearly that they have learned to discriminate the one significant sound difference in each direction, the difference of medial short vowel sounds of ending consonants.

However, in order to spell, children need to recognize the similarities within our spoken language; they must discern that some words begin the same way, that some words end the same way, and that some have similar middles. This awareness gradually leads children to understand that our spoken language consists of a fairly small number of sounds, sounds that we repeat and repeat in various combinations to make millions of words. Without this understanding, the concept of alphabetic writing is not likely to be understood.

Alphabetic Writing

Any written language is alphabetic if the sounds of the oral language are represented by letters in some consistent way. Written English is alphabetic. However, the Roman alphabet that was invented for writing Latin does not have enough letters to represent the forty plus sounds of spoken English without using a letter to represent more than one sound or the use of two letters to represent one sound. This lack of letters prevents written English from having a one-to-one relationship between letter and sound so that the alphabetic nature of written English is obscured and very difficult to discern. Further, the changes in speech, in dialects, that have occurred since standard spelling evolved, and the adoption of many foreign words into English as spelled in the foreign language have made written English seem non-phonetic or non-alphabetic. Still further, our most commonly used words in speech and those most necessary for reading and writing are somewhat irregular phonetic spellings, if we consider how they are spoken in normal con-

versation. The word to is pronounced the same as the word two, if we are reading from a spelling list, but in the sentence I went to two stores, the pronunciations are markedly different. Of is pronounced ov, is is pronounced iz, said is pronounced sed, etc. It is inevitable that some children will be unable to recognize the alphabetic nature of written English if we insist upon correct spelling whenever they write. Without an understanding of the alphabetic nature of written English it is unlikely that a child can ever learn to spell acceptably.

Watch the mouth of a grade one child who is trying to write. His mouth is the busiest part as he tries to spell a word by himself. Children use their mouths to feel sounds as they try to record them. Children can feel consonants within their mouths. Many children learn to feel sounds before they learn to hear them. They learn to feel the consonant sounds long before they are consciously aware of vowel sounds. Vowel sounds are extremely difficult to feel; they are indistinct; they mostly feel the same. Consequently, vowel sounds are much more difficult to learn.

Beginning the Teaching of Phonics

We consider phonics a spelling skill used when writing, so we begin phonics by beginning spelling and writing. We teach the children five or six consonants. Simultaneously we teach:

1. the name of the letter
2. the sound the letter represents
3. the way the letter is written
4. the way the phoneme is made within the mouth, the way it feels.

We have taught m, h, l, s, and t successfully as the first five. These consonants are used frequently and they are made quite differently within the mouth. Except for these two guides, the selection is arbitrary.

(It should be mentioned that we can discern no "right" way to teach phonics; there seems to be no one right way. We are aware of the incorrectness of isolating consonant sounds. We are aware that it cannot be done, but we are also aware of the dangers of not doing so, and the problems encountered if all consonant sounds are combined with vowel sounds in order to maintain correctness. The isolation of a sound in the beginning teaching is a momentary device to get children to hear and feel the consonants within spoken language. The sounds are used immediately within words and are practiced thereafter as parts of words that a child is writing in a message.)

Children are provided with small chalkboards, approximately 12" x 18", on which they learn to write the letter as they say its name and its sound. This is the first step in teaching the alphabetic principle, and the first step in developing the skill of spelling, getting children to understand that if they hear or feel a sound when they say a word that the sound is represented by a letter. Initially a one-sound one-letter relationship is maintained to make it easy for the child to sense the nature of alphabetic spelling.

The second step in the skill of spelling is developing the understanding that spelling requires the sequencing of the sounds within a word. To begin this skill the teacher has the children draw two short lines on their chalkboards:

The teacher dictates a word. THE CHILDREN REPEAT THE WORD. The children must learn to spell their own speech, so the teacher, in teaching spelling, must say each word only once for children. Each word that the teacher dictates either begins or ends with an /m/. (We use the slashes to indicate the sound represented by the letter m.) The children are taught to write m in the first space if they feel or hear an /m/ at the beginning, or to write an m in the last space if they feel an /m/ at the end. The teacher dictates 8 to 10 words on the first day, 8 to 10 different words on the second day, and 8 to 10 different words on the third day. The teacher may hold up pictures, ask the children to identify the

picture and to determine if they hear /m/. This entirely eliminates the teacher's saying of the word.

Each new letter is developed in the same way, but as new sounds are added, both the old and the new sounds are practiced daily on the chalkboards. The teacher will usually dictate monosyllabic words, but a sprinkling of polysyllabic words begins the notion that children can spell big words, too, and begins the notion that big words are no harder to spell than little words. Once the teacher has introduced five consonants, a matter of two to four weeks, all five consonants are practiced every day by dictating such words as boat, seem, foam, might, surf, moss, team, and fib. Once children have the two line notion and the beginning and ending concept fairly well learned, the teacher eliminates the two lines and challenges the pupils to listen for /m/, /b/, /f/, /s/, or /t/ in words like stab, blast, fast, staff, stuff, bats, bets, must, muffs, etc., having the children write three letters in sequence. The teacher should not be surprised if a few children begin to add correct letters such as the l in blast that have not been taught. Children do this once they have discerned the alphabetic principle and the fact that most letters have their sounds within their names. In doing this combined dictation children are practicing and reviewing all the letters that have been taught and are thereby learning the sound-symbol relationships and the sequencing of letter sounds.

The adding of a vowel cannot be postponed much longer so we teach short a in initial position following the same steps used for teaching a consonant, except that short /a/ does not exist in final position. We dictate am, at, ask, aspirin, etc. We move almost immediately into medial position and dictate many monosyllabic words which they can now write completely, fat, bat, sat, tat, mat, sam, tam, fast, mast, aft, staff, and words like staff in which the child spells staf. Consonant blends are not mentioned as blends; they are merely taught as sound-sequences. We find that children handle them quite naturally if the teacher says a word once, has the children repeat the word, and then asks the children what sound they feel first, what next, what next. If the child writes sb when trying to write stab, he is merely told that he left something out of the middle, and that he should say it again and listen. If he writes sab, he is told he left something out, etc. If he writes satb, he is told that he has the right letters but that something is out of order, and he is led to correct his sequencing. An integral part of teaching spelling is the correcting of mistakes as they occur, so that mistakes are not practiced.

With the introduction of the first short vowel, the children's writing on the chalkboards takes on a different form. The children are taught to roughly bisect their chalkboards into four equal-rectangles with their chalk.

The teacher dictates four words, saying each word once, and making sure that the child has recorded the word as correctly as can be demanded. To erase the words, one child is asked to read one of the words, and all the children find the word on their chalkboards and erase it; then a second child reads one of the remaining three words orally and all erase it, etc., so that children get practice in writing, spelling, and finally word identification.

Additional consonants and short vowels are added in the same way. Long vowels are introduced differently and treated as spelling patterns. The teaching of spelling is described in this paper as a somewhat isolated subject. However, spelling is a skill for writing as a part of a communication program in which children are expected to write at least one message every day. Children are expected to write as independently as possible.[1]

[1]See McCracken, R. A. and M. J. McCracken, READING IS ONLY THE TIGER'S TAIL. Leswing Press, San Rafael, California, 1972, for a description of one such program.

If children are taught to spell and if they are required to write everyday, they learn to express themselves fluently and in considerable length. Some pupils find spelling very easy and make few errors; others find spelling correctly rather hard, but they write just as extensively and their messages are equally interesting.

The following paper is typical in length and in the kinds of spelling errors made in grade one after five to six months of teaching.[2] The paper is from a child labeled as disadvantaged according to Federal guidelines of poverty. The writing is in response to oral work within the theme Myself, as children have discussed what different parts of their body can do. The sample is one day's writing. (The underlining is ours to indicate the misspellings.)

My legs can cik a ball and my legs can do a daes.

My legs can walk me to the store

My legs can duve a cor and spot the base

My legs can run home and play with me

My legs can wolk me home and play out baek

My legs can jupm rop and hop

My hands can do some house wrok

My hands can pic flowers and pretty flowers to

My hands can do pretty patning

My hands can bons a ball and rit

My hands can pat a god and

My hands can play with my god.

The child has written twelve sentences using a total of 101 running words. He spaced between words consistently, indicating that he knows what a word is. He has spelled 85 of the running words correctly. He can read his own writing as can any adult with a little practice. The errors are of reasonably good quality.

Kick spelled cik indicates that the use of c and k is not yet learned as /k/ usually being k before i, and the k for ck is a spelling pattern not yet known. Neither of these spelling principles or patterns had been taught, and it is unlikely that they will be taught before grade two. Daes for dance is more worrisome because the /n/ is not represented at all. The two vowels ae in dance and later in back (baek) are a little more worrisome. We would prefer das or bak as a better quality error. The ae may have occurred because the child has unconsciously noted vowel digraphs in books that he has read; it may be that someone has corrected his spelling so that he now adds letters in trying to be correct without understanding anything about spelling patterns. Jupm, patning, and god (jump, painting, and dog) all indicate that the child has not mastered the sequencing of sound, and these errors should be corrected as the teacher circulates as the children write or as the children read their writing to the teacher. Rit, pic, bons, rop, and cor (write, pick, bounce, rope and car) are good quality errors and indicate that the child is practicing as much as he has been taught. These errors would not be corrected at this time. They would be the basis for later lessons in spelling. Despite these errors the child has demonstrated that he has a reasonable grasp of the alphabetic principle. (He is 84% correct in his spelling of the running words.)

Teaching Spelling Patterns

Once children have demonstrated by their independent writing that they have sensed the alphabetic principle, they are ready to learn some of the common spelling patterns of written English. We begin with any simple one that seems to be interfering with standard spelling and move on to more sophisticated patterns in grades two, three, four and

[2]From the grade one Follow-Through class taught by Mrs. Jan Mahaffie in Clear Lake Elementary School, Clear Lake, Washington. Clear Lake is part of the Sedro-Woolley School District and is a participant in the Washington Triad Follow-Through Program sponsored through the Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Dakota.

up. The use of the letter y to represent long /e/ (or short /i/) on the end of words such as candy, milky, silky, etc., might be a first one. The use of s to represent both /s/ and /z/ on the end of words to make them plural is one of the first taught.

Long vowels are taught as spelling patterns with children learning the most common forms. They learn that meaning affects spelling so that long vowel patterns just have to be looked up and learned. Common patterns such as tion are taught and practiced in grade three and above. They are taught and practiced by the teacher dictating eight words a day, four at a time on a chalkboard as noted previously. (We keep emphasizing the chalkboards; we see greater success when the chalkboard work is maintained for dictation, even though the children are working freely with pencil or pen upon paper.) The teacher dictates a different set of eight tion-words each day for ten days, and then the children search as they read for /shun/ not spelled tion. They work together to note any spelling rule that they might form to determine when to use tion, sion, cean, etc. If they can discern no rule, they revert to the generalization that /shun/ is most frequently tion, but if they want to be sure, they either have to know or look it up.

In dictating tion-words the teacher might dictate:

notion	motion	transportation
potion	mention	section
notation	demonstration	plantation
promotion	formation	meditation
lotion	information	reflection
premonition	rotation	correction
election	explanation	sensation
prediction	location	condensation
		etc.

Obviously while the children are learning tion they are practicing syllabic spelling, the letter-sound relationships, and the sequencing of sounds that they have previously learned.

Practice

The key to a child's understanding and learning is his applying what he has been taught. To learn to spell, a child writes daily because he has something to record that he wants to remember or because he has something he wants to say. He writes sentences and stories independently and applies his spelling abilities in a meaningful context. When a child writes independently, he spells as well as he is able to. This poses the problem of what is correct spelling.

Spelling is perhaps the only skill area in which we routinely expect a child to perform instantly with perfection at levels well beyond what he has been taught. We accept a child's first baby talk; we expect a child to fall when he learns to walk; we teach a child to add sums to ten and never consider requiring him to do two column addition or division until he has practiced simple addition to the point of mastery and then been taught some more. For some reason we expect a child's first spelling to be correct, and we expect his first writing to be spelled correctly. If a child is to learn to spell (not just learn to write words correctly) then he must be allowed to practice what he has been taught, and we must demand and accept spelling that is as correct as can be expected as the child writes independently.

A grade one child wants to write We went on a picnic and it was a gorgeous day. He spells gorgeous, grjs. From the sentence it is perfectly clear that he is saying gorgeous. He has spelled it marvelously well for grade one, if he has not been taught that every syllable requires a vowel. If this has been taught, we would demand at least a grjus, and possibly gorjus, but the vowel /r/ requires a peculiar teaching all its own as a spelling pattern. In writing grjs the child has spelled all the sounds that he has been taught and he has sequenced them properly. He is practicing what he has been taught. We must ask the question is the child practicing what he has been taught? If the answer is yes, then there is nothing to correct now.

The way a child spells reflects two things. It reflects what he has been taught and learned, and it reflects what he now or still needs to learn. For example, if this same first grade child wrote that they had a race at the picnic and "I ran fats," the teacher would tell the child he had made a mistake, and if the child needed help in finding the spelling

mistake, the teacher helps him, or finally just tells him, that fast was spelled incorrectly. The child would correct fast as immediately as possible.

If a grade five child wrote, there are nine posishuns on a baseball team, he is either saying, "please teach me how to spell /shun/?" or he needs to be reminded how to spell /shun/. Judicious nagging is needed to develop good spelling habits. A child must practice what he has been taught, and teachers must look at misspellings and decide what needs to be taught next.

A child who writes hope, cape, came, and tune without the final e needs some teaching and directed practice with some long vowel patterns. The child who spells gris, hsptl, mtrskl is ready for some work with vowels. The child who spells winde, cande, and fune needs to be taught about the use of the letter y to represent long /e/ at the end of words. There is no particular order to the teachings. The teacher chooses an obvious error, teaches it to several children who seem to need it, judiciously nags them in their writing, and moves on to the next spelling need when this one has been fairly well learned. Thereafter, she demands correct spelling of that pattern.

Doozers

There is a third category of words. In writing or in speaking there is a small core of words that are used over and over again. A few are phonetically regular, such as and, he, it, etc., and they need no special attention. Most of these frequently used words, however, are not spelled as they sound. It is impossible to write without such words as is, was, does, were, they, because, why, of, the, etc. A child will use these words three or four hundred times during a school year if he writes every day. He cannot be allowed to practice misspelling a word for two or three years just because the spelling pattern has not yet been taught. The third grader who has been allowed to write thay for more than two years will have learned the misspelling so automatically that almost no amount of nagging will unlearn it. For this reason we begin a doozer list in grade one as soon as independent writing begins. We choose five doozers, print them in large print on cards and attach them to a doozer chart or board. The chart is in a conspicuous place in the classroom, and the child refers to the chart as often as necessary in learning to spell the doozers. A misspelled doozer is always corrected and as immediately as possible. We find that teachers and children can remember up to five doozers at one time. When no one in the class has misspelled a doozer for 2-3 weeks, the doozer is replaced by another doozer.

Conclusion

Spelling is a skill that develops gradually as a result of teaching and constant practice. As with other skills we should begin teaching simply and allow and demand that children practice as well as they know how. As children show us that they are able to apply what has been taught, we teach more and more sophisticated principles and patterns, demanding that children continue to practice what they already know and have been taught, until children have learned how to spell.

The two current practices of most schools, the teaching of spelling words, and the demand for perfect spelling (or the antithesis, never correcting spelling) in written work both seem to be detrimental to children in developing the skill of spelling.

An Introduction

By Clara A. Pederson

The McCrackens, Marlene and Robert, have been involved in writing and conducting in-service sessions for teachers since 1970. They are in great demand as workshop leaders and speakers at state, regional and national meetings because of their many practical, workable ideas which are based on their continued involvement with children in classroom settings.

Marlene is on the staff of the University of North Dakota, serving as Permanent Resource Colleague at the Washington (State) Triad Follow Through Program. Robert is on the staff of Western Washington State College, Bellingham, where he is associated with the reading and language arts program. Last year he was on leave from WWSC teaching at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia.

A few of their many publications are as follows:

Reading is Only the Tiger's Tail -- an excellent resource book for teachers filled with ideas for implementing a language arts program from kindergarten to grade six. This book is well illustrated with the work of elementary school children. (1972, $6.95)

Leswing Press
750 Adrian Way
San Rafael, California
94903

Tiger Cub Readers -- a series of easy-to-read children's books. (1973)

Leswing Press

Happiness is Reading -- a series of books for children. (1969-74)

Leswing Press

Standard Reading Inventory, Stories and Manual, Forms A and B -- an individually administered reading test for measuring reading achievement at pre-primer through seventh reader levels. (1963, 1966)

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. . . Arlene Silberman is reporting monthly in the Instructor magazine on good teaching practices she has observed? The first article in the October, 1976 issue described Marie Hughes's approach to communicating with parents.

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